

A NOTE FROM THE DEAD

Another of the "Gray Mask" Stories

BY WADSWORTH CAMP.

GARTH often suffered from lack of work at headquarters, probably because the inspector didn't care to send him out on unimportant matters that the least imaginative of his men could handle. When he had to assign him to an unpromising task, either to spare him too prolonged idleness or because no other detective was available, the big man always assumed an apologetic air. It was so when the started him on the mystifying Taylor case.

"Nothing 'doing these days,' he grumbled. 'City must be turning pure. Garth. Anyways, you got to give me something to do. Run around and take a look at this suicide. Seems Taylor was a recluse. Alone with his mother-in-law and the servants. Wife's in California. Suppose you had other plans, but I don't see why the city should pay you to take moonshine to Nora."

He grinned understandingly, encouragingly.

The detective nodded, strolled up town, and with a bored air stepped into a curious house.

Garth for a long time stared at the pallid features of the dead man. Abruptly his interest quieted down between the brows, and, forgetting of the clenched left hand, which dropped from the side of the bed, a speck of white protruded. The detective stooped swiftly. The hand was still, secreted a rough sheet of paper. He drew it out, smoothed the crumpled surface, and with a vast incredulity read the line scrawled across it in pencil:

"Don't think it's suicide. I've been killed."

There was no more. Until that moment Garth had conceived no doubt of the man's self-destruction. The body had ended on the left side of the bed, the revolver lay on the counterpane within an inch of the right hand, whose fingers remained crooked. The position of the body did not suggest the conception of resistance of an attack. In the room no sound of struggle survived.

Here was this amazing message from the dead man. Its wording indeed, offered the irrational impression of having been written after death.

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GARTH thought rapidly. Granted its accusation, the note must have been scrawled between the firing of the shot and the moment of Taylor's death. But a murderer, arranging this appearance of suicide, would have given Taylor no opportunity. On the other hand, the theory that Taylor had written the note before killing himself, perhaps to direct suspicion to some unknown person, had come before the brief wording, its patent incompleteness. One possibility remained. Garth could imagine no motive, but another person might have prepared the grim message.

A number of books littered the reading table at the side of the bed. Garth examined them eagerly. He found a blank page torn from one of the sheet which Taylor had clutched in his hands. In another was Taylor's signature. When Garth had compared it with the message on the crumpled paper no doubt remained. Taylor had written those obscene and provocative words.

Garth found the pencil on the floor beneath the bed, as it had rolled there when Taylor had dropped it. The place where Taylor had written his note lay beyond an abnormally large array in the bathroom of bottles containing for the most part stimulants and sedatives. They must have strengthened his suggestion that Taylor was an invalid, his appearance of suicide.

The coroner and Taylor's doctor, who came together, only added to the mystery. The doctor died uneventfully for suicide, and, in reply to Garth's anxious question, swore that no measurable time could have elapsed between the firing of the shot, which had probably been a suicide, and Taylor's death. The physician was satisfied even after Garth confidentially showed him the note.

"Mr. Taylor," he said then, "understood he had incurable trouble. Every one knows that his wife, whom he worshipped, had practically left him by going to California for so long. It may have appealed to a grim sense of justice that his wife, an obese invalid, to puzzle us with that absurdly worded note. I might tell you, too, that Taylor, for some time, had had a fear that he might go crazy. Perpetually he questioned me about insanity, and wanted to know what treatment I would give him if his mind went."

Garth, however, when they had left, was in the lower floor and telephone headquarters. The inspector agreed that the case held a mystery which must be solved.

Garth walked to the eminence of a high Colonial window. The early winter night was already thick above the world. The huge room was too dark. The Taylor home was a large, colonial frame farmhouse which had been converted into a comfortable and extravagant dwellings of a fashionable uptown district. In spite of its generous furnishings it projected even to this successful and materialistic dweller a sense of the past, melancholy and disturbing.

Garth sighed. He had made up his mind. The best way to get at the truth was to accept for the present the dead man's note. He turned on the single light above the desk in the center of the room. He arranged a chair so that the glare would reach its occupant. He sat down, and pressed a button. Almost at once he heard dragging footsteps in the hall, then a timid rapping at the door. The door opened slowly. A bent old man in tattered clothes, with a face like the dead, was at the door. It was the servant who had admitted Garth on his arrival a few minutes earlier. The detective indicated the chair on which the light fell.

"Sit down there, please."

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As the old man obeyed his limbs shook with a sort of palsy. From his sallow and sunken face restlessness, bloodshot eyes gleamed.

"I understand from the doctor," Garth began, "that you are McDonald, Mr. Taylor's trusted servant. The inspector says death occurred in his room, or service. Tell me why you didn't find the body until nearly 4 o'clock this afternoon."

The old servant bent forward, placing the palm of his hand against his ear.

"Eh? Eh?"

On a high key Garth repeated his question. McDonald answered in tremulous tones, clearing his throat from time to time, as though his heart, beaten by his master's bad health, had been never to disturb him except in cases of emergency. He drew a telegram from his pocket, passing it across to Garth.

"Mr. Taylor is on our way home from California. I don't think Mr. Taylor knew just what connection he would make at Chicago, but he expected her tomorrow. That telegram, sent from the train, is all. Also, says he, with a smile this afternoon in the Western express. I thought it my duty to disturb him and get him up to welcome her, for he was very fond of her. I will be cruel for her to me."

"Then," Garth said, "you heard no shot?"

McDonald indicated his ears. Garth tugged at his watch chain.

"I know more about the conditions in this house last night," he had spoken softly, musingly, yet the man, who had displayed the symptoms of a radical deafness, glanced up, and with a slight hesitation.

"You don't suspect anything out of the way, sir?"

Garth stopped him narrowly.

"I want to know why the shot was."

"I heard, you were here and Mr. Taylor."

"I was more agitated than before. His face was

distorted. His tongue moistened his lips thirstily. Against his will Garth applied the method he knew would bring the quick result with which he had stopped the stopped shoulders. He shouted.

Garth dismissed him, instructing him to send Mrs. Taylor's mother. While he waited he strolled from the window again. Just outside at a slight angle from McDonald he had received a sharp impression of secretive heat.

Garth swung around with a quick intake of breath. He had heard no one enter. Yet almost, with a sense of something, he had reached him through the heavy atmosphere of the old house, an assurance that he was wanted from the shadows. Impulsively he called out:

"Who's that?"

He stepped to the desk so that the entire portion of the room beyond the light was empty. He sprang back, turning. A clear, girlish

voice had come from the shadows. "I'm your daughter now!"

"My ears!" the old servant whined.

"I can't hear, sir."

"All right," Garth shouted. "If you want to go to the lookout and your daughter, too, stay as deaf as you please."

He wasn't prepared for the revolting outburst that came to him. McDonald clutched at one of his shoulders and hid his twitching face in the folds of his coat, difficult and sickening, torn from his throat, shaking his bent head. "I'm your daughter now!"

"I'm your daughter now!"